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The Information Superhighway and Traditional Communication: Where We Stand

By Wole Adamolekun

Abstract

Advances in communication technology, bring with them new characteristics which often expand the horizons for information exchange among people. The evolving information superhighway is promising to break the physical barriers to the free flow of information. This has serious implications for developing countries. As many parts of the world adopt the new technologies of the information superhighway African countries should be cautious and not too readily abandon their traditional communication methods, which are not necessarily anti-thetical to the Internet. As exciting as the new technologies are, they do not always portend positive developments.

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La Super Voie de Communication et la Communication Traditionnelle: Le Choix S'Impose

Par Wole Adamolekun

Résumé

Selon l'auteur de cet article, le développement de la technologie communicationnelle apporte de nouvelles possibilités, ainsi améliorant l'échange d'informations à tout les niveaux. C'est justement ce que promet de réaliser l'évolution de la Super Voie de Communication. Il n'oublie pas, pour autant, de signaler que cet avancement implique des cangements divers et plus ou moins profonds, dans les pays du Tiers Monde. Adamolekum soutient qu'avec l'adoption de cette technologie par une bonne partie des régions du monde, les pays africains devraient faire davantage d'attention avant d'abandonner les moyens traditionnels de communication, au profit des moyens modernes. Car si ceux-là ne sont pas toujours favorables au développement, ceux-ci ne sont pas forcément incompatibles avec l'Internet.

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Don't embrace technology for technology's sake.
Use commonsense to determine when to use new
media and when to use more traditional methods.
It's great to have electronic relationships, but we
always need old fashioned human contact.
Moshe Triwaks.

Three decades ago when Marshall Mcluhan, foretold the confluence of computers, communications and information into what he termed the Global Village, little did we know that distances would no longer matter in the bargain. Information has become so strategic in the new hi-tech village that people across the world are linked seamlessly and instantaneously at a reduced cost, and with the same significance as the discovery of electric light, the telephone and the printing press. The information revolution has literally rendered all man-made barriers of physical borders and other contraptions inhibiting its free flow unnecessary and superfluous.

The Information Superhighway

What exactly is information superhighway? Some call it the "All-Digital, Simultaneous, Real-Time, Interactive, Broadband, Multimedia, Information Superhighway." However, AT & T's vision simply puts it as bringing people together, giving them easy access to each other and to the information and services they want and need - anytime, anywhere. The information superhighway is a seamless web of communication and information networks - together with other elements of national information infrastructure, such as computers, databases, and consumer electronics - which will put vast amounts of information at the fingertips of a variety of users. This information superhighway (1-way as its fondly called) is a vast inter operable network of networks - embracing local, long distance and global networks, wireless, broadcast and cable, electronic-mail, voice mail, video phones, electronic newspapers, telex news via television (the flat

- panel newspaper) video conferencing, satellites and most important, the Internet.

The information superhighway as awesome as it seems is just but evolving and is still a vision thing. What we would end up with is not exactly known to anybody. The information super-highway as we know it today is not just an improvement over what existed, it represents near Utopian possibilities: revolutions golden ages, new fortunes to be made, new careers and lifestyles designed as people connect globally without leaving home. This in essence can be seen as the re-engineering of the society in terms of how we live, play, work, travel and communicate. In the areas of education, many more people would be engaged in distance learning and school at home; reputable medical consultants would be able to interact with field health workers and even individual patients; homes would virtually serve as offices without losing productivity and the collaborative work environment of the office as we know it now and the need for physical visits and shopping would be embarked upon when it is absolutely necessary.

It is gratifying that some areas of the African continent are linking up as fast as the Internet and the world-wide web are being developed. The draft constitution of Eritrea was recently sent through the Internet to constitutional experts around the world. South Africa is particularly strategic in her total involvement in the global networking and connectivity of hi-tech information systems. In several countries along the west coast and Nigeria in particular, only multinationals, high networth individuals and some individual business people are linked with the I-way. In other words, people in the area are at best observers and peripheral participants who are stuck in a pothole at the very beginning of the information superhighway.

The hi-tech information technology involves mostly gadgets that are currently in use. The telephone (analogue and digital), cellular phones, computer, fax machines, broadcast television and radio, cable television, live broadcast, on-line computer networks, satellite and wireless networks are all components of

the information superhighway. Most of these facilities are available and operational with varying degrees of successes and efficiency all over the continent. The important thing to note is that we tend to overestimate the potential of communication technology forgetting that the software and hardware could be ineffective if there no skilled and creative people to operate, and funds to maintain them. Furthermore, many communication experiments failed dismally because of inadequate attention to the interplay of socio-political variables that would determine the cultural relevance and acceptability of the system. This is why hundreds of crates of computers meant for some Nigerian schools are left in the open for years without anybody worrying about what to do with them.

What is in it for developing countries?

The information superhighway has a lot of promise for the developing nations of the world particularly those in Africa. Whenever we get connected on the information superhighway ramp, the potentials include:

a) Education would benefit through the enhancement of the distance learning system which the poor economy and the increased demand for tertiary and professional education have made compelling.

b) Theposiibility for experienced consultants to serve many more medical institutions and centres through the power of communication. Information storage, retrieval and dissemination in the world-wide web/networks could be cost effective.

c) Rural-urban migration in the long run may be contained as people wherever they are can have what they desire without too much physical movements. Advanced information technology will guarantee jobs and services in all places be they

rural or urban.

d) Working at home with hi-tech communication may become attractive to members of the business class who clutter the streets with several vehicles and personnel in different directions in pursuit of valued jobs. It is a potential area that could be explored as we get on the information superhighway proper.

e) The economy has truly become global and it is only wise to hook on to the information superhighway to remain relevant, profitable and prosperous.

f) The great strides in information technology would further build the global society with as many nations being able to interact, transact and communicate with other people without losing their cultural identity and preferences.

In order to benefit from the foregoing, it may be necessary for the developing nations that are still preparing to move on to the information superhighway to consider substantial investment in communication infrastructure. Leap frogging or jump-starting has been recommended as there is no wisdom in starting with gadgets that have long been abandoned for more efficient and cost-effective alternatives. Rather than buy old technologies, it is more prudent to invest scarce capital resources in modern technologies still conscious of the need and capacity of the people to sustain it. In the words of Mayo (1995), "the global leaders of the 21st century will be those countries that have not only invested in the right technologies, but also in the intellectual growth of their people."

Communication systems in Nigeria

So much for the information superhighway. The Nigerian experience at adopting information technologies is very instructive. Over the years, we have tried several methods of technology transfer, adoption, copying and missteps. Today, it is difficult to pin point how far we have gone in our drive to become a technologically-developed nation. Whatever stage and type of technology that is imaginable in the whole world, (the internet inclusive) is provided in Nigeria. The question really is how extensive and what impact have these technologies on the people and economy? Surely our communication sector is not as coordinated and developed as it should be. Social infrastructures such as electric light, personnel, technical know-how and depressed economy have continued to make communications erratic, expensive and unserviceable. Despite the fact that the country has the potentials to accommodate the most modern technology in the communication industry, it cannot guarantee the efficiency of basic such as telephone let alone cellular phones and fax machines.

Yes, the television and radio as important sections of the information superhighway have continued to perform wonderfully even under unimaginable odds of using absolute and inefficient equipment. The attempt of cable television is still in its infancy and it may become another good programme gone awry unless the regulatory body steps in to ensure that the service providers do not over exploit their monopoly which may ultimately stifle the development. Most times, the service you get is not commensurate with the price paid by subscribers. The same is the story of the cellular telephone. Even the land phones are inadequate; and big exchanges are located in places where they may not be fully subscribed for another two decades.

The computer may be more accessible to people in the developing countries as it is more personal; it can also be interactive and dynamic in solving many informational problems.

A personal computer equipped with a modem could get you to the on-ramp with the assistance of a local service provider. Also, we are in the video age which promises to be most useful in the less developed nations. When fully developed, video conferencing could facilitate business to the extent that it would save time, enhance productivity, reduce travel time while still ensuring greater person-to-person contact.

The foregoing statement have been made to establish our haphazard and peripheral attempts at joining the world in the explosive and confounding information revolution being witnessed today.

The reasons for this unfortunate and uncoordinated approach is not far to seek. It seems logical that not much impact can be made as we have neglected the important step of taking into cognisance our technical capabilities, culture, finances and level of communication infrastructure. More than often, our foray into communication and technology adoption has been more fancy and based on the wish to be seen as modern rather than the desire to make communication work for the people.

This is why successive governments in Nigeria as in some other African countries have expended so much in modern communication yet only limited and qualified achievements have been recorded. As we approach the turn of the century, we are still combining the old analog telephone system with digital and even cellular. In some places there are about three different types of telephone services and each of them is nearly too expensive for the people. There are faxes, voice mail and answering machines. It is ironic that we have the gamut of what is needed to be well connnected in the world's information system but really nothing seems to be working.

The result of all these unplanned communication systems is that we have now found ourselves in the middle of nowhere and our next steps are uncertain. Julius Nyerere humorously stated some years back that while others try to reach the moon, we try to reach our villages. The lesson to draw from this is that we have to start by communicating effectively with our people in the rural

areas who constitute more than seventy percent of our population. It is also these neglected people that constitute the most productive segment of the population in most African countries.

In recent times, there has been a conscious effort by some African governments to boost communication generally through privatisation and commercialisation programme. While most government communication agencies are still torn between real commercialisation and depending on government subventions, private organisations have come to give them a very keen competition. The situation portends great promise for the development of the information superhighway in Africa because the private sector is usually the engine for technological development.

Traditional communication

The invasion of the airwaves by the optical fibres carrying large volumes of data at a speed comparable only to that of light from one end of the world to the other notwithstanding, many people in Africa are still ignorant of the information superhighway. They still go about their daily chores the way they know best - using the well known and established traditional methods of communication. The most important tools of this system are face-to-face communication, village square meetings, rooster alarm, story telling, music (wooden flute, metal gong, antelope horn etc.), masquerades, age groups, opinion leaders, open air theatre, body and sign language. All these community-based methods of communication are the basis of Africa's rich cultural and historical heritage (Adaba 1995).

The efficacy of these methods is not in doubt as they have cemented and sustained the growth of various cultures, indigenous technology, and skilled local business enterprises which still constitute important aspects of Third World economies. At least, most of these people at the grassroots level have been able to meet their socio-political needs making the best of well-tested and eccepted communication systems. A Nigerian masquerade

(efe) typifies traditional communication usage in many African countries.

In many communities there are variants of the Efe Masquerade dance. Efe in its ordinary usage could mean jesting. However, the traditional and original concept of efe is a powerful communication medium used to convey serious socio-political messages in a subtle but pungent manner. During an efe masquerade dance outing, certain anti-social and distasteful behaviour of individuals are poignantly exposed in songs, dance and drama which leave nobody in doubt as to who the culprit is and what should be done about him. As a result of the celebrations accompanying efe, it attracts as large following and information thus gathered is disseminated far and wide. The affected people may instantly become pariah in the community unless socially acceptable atonement is made for the misdemeanour. Most annual festivals in many African communities use credible opinion leaders to castigate social miscreants. This has served as a deterrent over the years and provide lessons for the young ones. Today we talk of junk journalism because the malfeasance of the high and mighty in the society is exposed. This is why many people are no longer enthralled with attempt by some African governments to redefine what is in the public and or private interest, in as much as the conduct of their functionaries are concerned. The traditional society does not have this ambiguity, which is a credit to its communication system.

Experience has shown that in spite of the tremendous attraction modern communication holds for all, the basics hardly change. The electronic mail, video teleconferencing, telephone and the ever dynamic and interactive personal computer can never replace face-to-face communication. As Peterson (1995) puts it, before you can achieve good communication, you must first know and tune into your audiences. This character of the traditional communication with the special efforts of eye contact makes it well suited for the largely illiterate population in African countries.

Whereas the media hype of information superhighway may seem to indicate that everybody is into it, we all know that it

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would continue to be for an extremely few people with the means and even the need to bother about it. As for the majority of the people still hooked to the old reliable oramedia and pseudo modern communication, they will and should plan to link up with superhighway as things must change for the better. Rapid developments in technology and demands for greater job performance, economy of scale and comparative advantage require a modernization of our old system in order not to be left behind in world development.

Where we stand

It is not an exaggeration to say that some African countries are already in the league of multi-media, interaction, real-time, digital and narrow band information systems. All the new developments in telecommunication as earlier stated are operable and in existence but their influence and impact are certainly insignificant. There is therefore the need to establish practicable and definite strategies to link up with the world.

What we have on the ground is an amalgamation of all sorts and there is need for communications regulatory bodies to harmonise their efforts and decide on how best to use the old and new methods of communication. While the elite business class cannot be stopped from its fancy game of adopting what may not be sustained, the working middle class, students and the majority of the people must be assisted to make the right choices that will actually help them in becoming more productive, efficient and cost effective.

There is need for African governments to establish regulatory bodies to guarantee easy access and use of information technology. Some of the issues that needed to be addressed include:

(a) Checking in-coming information through the internet and other hitech information-laden systems to ensure that what publics get is what is needed. As already recognised, the internet has a lot of garbage packages that may have negative

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consequences on young people.

(b) Many African countries are slow in standardising the adoption of any technology. Communication technology changes so rapidly and the cost is rather prohibitive if standards are not set.

(c) In latching on to the information superhighway, specific information infrastructures would have to be developed to suit the needs of the countries in question. That some developing countries as Brazil, Indonesia and India are up to date in information technology is not accidental. They were able to develop and evolve their own systems over a considerable length of time before they arrived where they are now. There is need for African countries to begin the same process now for a better future in informatics.

The way forward

That African countries should cruise on the information superhighway is not in question. What we need to resolve is how we can meaningfully become active participants in the new world information order. Below are some proposals of what can be done to help realise the benefits of new communication technology:

(i) A new beginning in developing enduring information infrastructures that would take cogniscance of our cultural heritage, literacy level, capacity utilisation, maintenance culture and the existing traditional communication system is necessary. There is a lot of wisdom in taking the people through familiar systems to the more complicated and unknown systems, no matter how efficacious they may be.

ii) The chaotic and indiscriminate importation and adoption of hi-tech information system we do not have need for is a waste

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of scarce resources.

iiii) Some of our media houses have mostly disused and archaic equipment's. Some of the attempts made to modernise both the radio and television services have not succeeded since our technology adoption strategies are lagging behind.

iiv) Privatisation and deregulation in Africa has opened the floodgate for some entrepreneurs to get into specialised areas Most African newspapers that are professional today are those that are owned by practising journalist who live by the pen. When businessmen float newspapers, they are usually ready to pander to their primary interest - profit making. The lesson from all these is that the public interest should be paramount in communication operations.

(v) A symbiotic relationship can exist between the seemingly jet age communication system of the western world and the rather aged traditional communication systems in Africa. The focus of communication is people and the only way communication can be effective is when there is a two-way flow. For as long as the majority of the people are illiterate and live in the rural areas, so would the temptation to go back to the good old days of village mobile film shows, gong man and other local methods of communication be strong.

Conclusion

There is need for developing nations to be extremely careful as we admire and contemplate where to join the bandwagon on the information superhighway. If we must know, it is full of several booby traps for unwary and unprepared information wayfarers. The sheer great immediacy and drama we now experience and the speed at which we can view what is happening world wide (the O.J. Simpson real-time chase on cable network, the space shuttles, the disaster stories and epoc making peace accords

after several decades of war) makes it extremely difficult to easily process the data we have on our hands at any given time. Increasingly we are becoming less analytical and mere consumers and passive onlookers. There is need to recognise the responsibility to help people understand, evaluate and appreciate the advantages and disadvantages of each technology, and also take due care to use each one appropriately and strategically.

By now the excitement and attraction to new technologies that have not moved us forward ought to reduce while we become more sober and reflective in our future communication policy formulation and execution. Leap frogging and jump starting will work only if the government and indeed the operators of the system cooperate to create an enabling environment for a more purposeful and beneficial communications system in Africa.

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